

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 092

CS 509 114

AUTHOR Dick, Robert C.; Robinson, Brenda M.
TITLE Intercultural Dimensions of Teaching Speech
Communication in Malaysia: Negotiating the Malays'
Malaise.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Convention of
the World Communication Association (Vancouver,
British Columbia, Canada, July 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) --
Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Research; *Cultural Differences; Cultural
Influences; Educational Cooperation; Ethnography;
Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Instructional
Effectiveness; *Intercultural Communication;
*International Programs; Program Effectiveness;
*Speech Communication; *Student Behavior; Teaching
Methods
IDENTIFIERS Indiana University; *Malaysia; *Malaysians

ABSTRACT

A study examined a cooperative international education program established between Indiana University and the government of Malaysia entitled the Institut Teknologi MARA/Midwest University Consortium for International Activities (ITM/MUCIA). It further explored the issues to be addressed in turning over the program to Malaysian faculty and assuring the effectiveness of the courses and credit transferability to Indiana. The ethnographic study investigated the unique elements in the culture of Malaysian students enrolled in ITM/MUCIA that affect their speech communication education. For example, student classroom behavior differed from that in the United States--students talked loudly amongst themselves when designated speakers were delivering discourses, yet were quiet when an instructor spoke and whispered answers when called upon. Conclusions were that: (1) the Malaysian students in MUCIA have received speech communication training equal to that in the American classroom; (2) to assure credit transferability to Indiana University, the Malaysian faculty should supplement language focus with reasoning, critical thinking, and application of supporting material; and (3) the latter must be done while seeking maximum use of freedom of speech within the religious, governmental, and cultural parameters existent in Malaysia. (Contains 23 references.) (CR)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

**INTERCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING
SPEECH COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA:
NEGOTIATING THE MALAYS' MALAISE**

by

Robert C. Dick, Visiting Professor at ITM/MUCIA, Indiana University
Cooperative Program in Malaysia

and

Brenda M. Robinson, Assistant to the Provost at ITM/MUCIA,
Indiana University Cooperative Program in Malaysia

Presented
at the

Biennial Convention of the World Communication Association

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Dick

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Vancouver, Canada
July, 1995

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

DS509114

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, a cooperative international educational program was established between Indiana University and the government of Malaysia. It was entitled ITM/MUCIA, acronym for Institut Teknologi MARA/Midwest University Consortium for International Activities. The program was designed so Malaysian students could take the first portion of their baccalaureate coursework in Malaysia from U.S. faculty on location there, and receive Indiana University academic credit. This credit then was transferred to U.S. colleges and universities at which students completed undergraduate degrees in more than ten major academic areas, the more populous of which were engineering, business, computer science, science, and the social sciences. A small number were in the humanities, particularly history. Altogether, more than 4,500 students went through the system. By the end of 1992, more than 3,000 of them had transferred from ITM/MUCIA to approximately 175 U.S. institutions, and over 900 of them already had completed their degrees and returned to Malaysia (McKibben, 1995; Summers, Dobson, Yasok, Ahmad, & Valois, 1993).

The Malaysian courses carried the same numbers and descriptions as ones in the IU curriculum, and each academic area had a U.S. supervisory liaison. For instance, the speech communication offerings in ITM/MUCIA were from the IU Indianapolis curriculum, and one of the authors was the disciplinary liaison responsible for final recommendations on syllabi, texts, and faculty applications from the inception of the program.

For some time, administrators from both countries had said that the 1994-95 academic year possibly would be the last one for the program in its existing form. There had been an ongoing effort to "Malaysianize" it, having Malaysian faculty teach essentially the same courses but without IU credit, and then having the students directly apply for transfer credit for those courses. With this understanding, the authors assumed one-year appointments on the Malaysian campus, starting fall, 1994.

The purpose of this study was (1) to discover directly the unique elements in the culture of ITM/MUCIA students that affect their speech communication education, and (2) thereby at least to imply the issues to be addressed in Malaysianizing the program in order to maximize the effectiveness of the courses under their new management and enhance the likelihood of credit transferability.

CONTEXT

In order to gain fullest perspective on the teaching aspects involved, one must first comprehend the historical-cultural milieu from which the students came. Malaysia gained independence from England in 1957. At that time the proportionment of the three predominant cultures--Chinese, Indian, and Malay--was nearly the same as now. Over 30% were Chinese, mostly Buddhists, who were primarily urban and entrepreneurial; they had established themselves in business and professions, and had acquired a sizable portion of the nation's wealth. Indians, mostly Hindus, comprising over 10% of the population, were divided between urban and rural; the former primarily were in small business and service, including many domestic laborers, while the bulk of the latter worked in agriculture, mines, and on rubber plantations. Malays, the largest group, with over 50% of the population, almost all of whom were Islamic, historically had remained rural, earning a relatively meager income through farming and fishing. While reviewing that group's economic status in the 1960's, Rehman Rashid remarked of the new constitution,

that "The Malays may have been assured of the pre-eminence in government and a clear majority in the population, but what did such platitudes mean when they held only 2% of the nation's wealth" (Rashid, 1993, p. 86)?

Indeed the Constitution had recognized the native origin of the Malays, symbolized by granting political roles to the sultanates, but only later were specific policies developed to give greater employment and other resource opportunities to the Malays. In effect, the Malays gave themselves a form of affirmative action treatment to compensate for their being alienated over time from the prosperity of the country in which they were the majority.

The most direct preferential treatment in education came as a result of the New Economic Policy of 1971. The NEP was designed to eliminate the economic, geographic, and other demarcations among the ethnic groups of Malaysia. Along with greater preferential treatment in employment and ownership of resources, a quota system was set for Malays in higher education and a majority of government scholarships was reserved for Malay students. The future Prime Minister, Mahathir, had issued a rationalization for educational discrimination in his 1969 book, The Malay Challenge, in which he wrote that exclusive scholarships "are not a manifestation of racial inequality. They are a means of breaking down the superior position of the non-Malays in the field of education. The Malays are not proud of this treatment They would like to get rid of their privileges if they can, but they have to let pride take second place to the facts of life" (p.76).

Even more direct to this study, the ITM was established, which admitted only students of Malay and indigenous origin, a group known as Bumiputras (Pong, 1993). The ITM campuses were built throughout peninsular Malaysia, and Malay students who met the qualifications were given all expense-paid scholarships to attend. Shah Alam's ITM campus, of which ITM/MUCIA was a small part, is the largest such campus in Malaysia. It is close to Kuala Lumpur, and part of a large urban area. Throughout the decade, the MUCIA enrollees numbered about 1,200 each semester, dwindling slightly in fall, 1994, and dropping all the way to 320 during spring, 1995, the last regular semester

(McKibben, 1995). Contemporaneously during those closing semesters, "Malaysianization" was most clearly manifested in the American Degree Program (ADP), another part of ITM on the Shah Alam campus, which had begun teaching courses similar to MUCIA's, with Malaysian instructors.

STUDENT DEMEANOR

There are multiple influences on student behaviors and no generalizations can be made to fit all students at MUCIA. But, there were some characteristics that were extremely common.

The students at ITM/MUCIA were highly conservative, at least ostensibly, and nearly all were Islamic. In programs such as this, there had been an effort by many local academic administrators to combat what they perceived to be a "slavish imitation of the liberal and permissive life-style of secular universities in the West" (Hassan, 1994). Indeed, in Malaysia there was an expansion of the Islamic consciousness in the late seventies and eighties, with heavy criticism of "immoral" aspects of campus life. The Islamic ideas of modesty and values of the "proper relationship between the sexes" and "decent" attire began to spread all over the educational system (Hassan, 1994). Female students in our classes wore formal Islamic garb and insisted on sitting as a group in a separate part of the room from the males. The males likewise automatically seated themselves separately from the females, but several wore more casual, western-looking attire.

Directly and/or indirectly, our students had been the recipients of a plethora of recent efforts by Malaysian Islamic movements and organizations to develop "personalities and [a] society consistent with the holistic ideals of Islam." From the 1970's, the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia had started its own kindergarten and private secondary school. In the 1980's, it started Islamic primary schools. And the Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) also had started primary and secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur in the 1980's.

Courses on Islamic religious education were made compulsory for all Muslims in the MARA Institute of Technology in the late seventies (Hassan, 1994). Perhaps as a consequence of all this activity, at least a nucleus of our students appeared to harbor an ingrained skepticism of Western ways.

One of the most problematic yet benign behaviors was the tendency for students to talk among themselves, often very loudly, while designated speakers were delivering discourses in the front of the room. This was done frequently despite admonitions from the instructors to the effect that it is rude and impolite to speak at most gatherings in the U.S. when others have the floor. Yet, one must ask if an instructor in such a foreign communication class should expect the audience members-- or speakers for that matter--to conduct themselves according to standards or expectations of those students' own culture, with which they might well be learning to communicate, or according to the instructor's cultural criteria? Early on, the authors went to forums, symposia, and other types of speaking events in the area, and discovered that the norm is to have frequent if not constant talk among audience members during formal presentations. Thus, there was a possible disservice in asking the class members to remain quiet during a speech. Instead, perhaps student speakers should have been challenged to vie for the attention of a chattering audience. Even at non-political events, Malaysians customarily need to speak in a context not unlike that of western political conventions.

Yet, the students were significantly quiet whenever an instructor spoke. Whether it was because of uncertainty in speaking English, fear of breaking a code, or because they were accustomed to an educational system in which they primarily listened to lectures-- which they claimed was the case--or for whatever reason, the students preferred not to say anything during lecture-discussion sessions. If an instructor asked a general question, the classes became deadly silent--as in a Quaker meeting in which all wait for the spirit to move someone. Except in this case the spirit remained inactive. This problem of non-participation in the classroom is common for Asian students, and can become exacerbated

when they transfer to the U.S. and are supposed to interact with Western students (Dick & Robinson, 1992). In our classes, if a student contribution was made, voluntarily or otherwise, invariably it came the form of a whisper. Asking the student to speak more loudly often brought increased volume that carried for two or three rows instead of the original one or fewer. Therefore, if the instructor wanted to know what the student said, it often was necessary to go to the student's desk and listen carefully. Lecturers on campus frequently called this the "Phil Donohue Method." There were ways to bring out these students' participation, but it took considerable effort from the outset of each semester.

Another student behavior that merits considerable thought concerns kinds of mutual cooperation that were hard for Westerners to differentiate from cheating. Of course, there are some unacceptable practices that are similar in both the U.S. and Malaysia. For instance, in the U.S. there tend to be speech outlines that are placed in fraternity and sorority files or other such places from which they appear in recycled form from time to time. In Malaysia, there are similar files that seem to be accessible to greater numbers of people, and there is perhaps more indiscriminate use. For instance, in a fall semester 10:30 am class, one author heard a speech that had all main points and supports nearly identical with what he had heard during the previous hour. The sense of "sharing" materials, even those that were supposed to be created or otherwise handled independently, had to be addressed and monitored carefully in order to maximize the learning process for all.

A disturbing practice that transpired in Malaysia was that of the students going through instructors' materials in faculty offices. On the MUCIA campus, two to four faculty members shared the same office, occupying partitioned areas that had desks with ununlockable drawers. On several occasions each semester, students came in while one of the authors was present, and looked through the papers of absent instructors. When confronted, the students explained that they were given permission by the instructor to

come get their papers, exams and the like. Subsequent inquiry in all but one instance revealed that the instructor did not recall having given said permission.

Perhaps the greatest frustration concerning this matter came when a student in one of our classes gave a persuasive speech asserting the proposition that there was a problem with instructors not locking exams and papers they did not want circulated. The implication was that anything left in unsecured drawers was fair game to be taken so long as it was shared and not "selfishly hogged" by the one(s) who took it.

While some of the written work was analytically and perceptively prepared, and submitted in neat, legible form, a large portion of the work appeared, in form and substance, to be in various stages of "rough-draft." It was handwritten in pencil, the writing usually was microscopic, and trying to read it was similar to having a microfiche but no machine with which to magnify it. Consequently, when students were asked to have a brief, extemporaneous "speaking outline," careful procedures had to be worked out and understood. Otherwise, a large number of the oral communication students were capable of getting nearly a complete manuscript on a 3 by 5 card, and would attempt to do so because of stage fright, language concerns, and the like. And notwithstanding the size of the writing on "speaking outlines," there frequently were cross-outs and editorial markings on "preparation outlines" as well as other papers that were supposed to be in final form when handed-in.

Apparently, such "final products" were not totally peculiar to MUCIA instructors, and not to be taken as a personal insult by anyone. We were relieved even to find some corroboration by a native who recorded similar experience when paper-grading became part of his job as a graduate research associate at another Malaysian University. Wrote he: "The scruffiest pieces of work--a few paper-clipped sheets of longhand--would invariably come from Malay students Then, upon reading the papers, I'd see an equal gulf in diligence [between Bumiputras and non-Bumiputras] that had gone into them. One or two of the Malays were so obviously lackadaisical that I thought they must have handed in their

rough drafts by mistake. But no: this was indeed all they thought necessary for their coursework. I was enraged. Didn't they know what they were up against? Couldn't they see how earnest their non-Malay colleagues were, and the standard they were setting" (Rashid, 1993, pp. 155-156)?

We emphasize that an appreciable number of MUCIA communication students were thorough and conscientious, and this is merely to express concern that several, particularly those remaining in the final semester, either did not apply themselves fully or did not know how to do so.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The substance of classroom speechmaking was greatly affected by a lack of freedom of speech in Malaysia. Unlike in some more liberal nations, one cannot presume that Malaysian students can feel free to express themselves or that through the media they can be exposed to different views on issues and supporting facts for those views. Before elaborating on the reasons for Malaysian limitations on free speech or media coverage of current issues and topics of concern, some commendations and positive admissions are in order.

The Malaysian economy has prospered during recent decades. The country is moving rapidly towards industrialization. The standard of living is becoming good for Malaysians of all religious and ethnic affiliations. It has rapidly acquired modern conveniences and technological advancements. But, this recent speed and efficiency might have come at a high price. Whether it be in the classroom or in a public assembly, many democratic nations believe more than Malaysia does that the basic rights of the individual, particularly the rights of free speech, should be protected. Moreover, they believe that the media have an obligation to explore issues and give as much equitable treatment as possible to persons who espouse differing positions. And they strike a delicate balance between individual rights and societal rights.

A number of Malaysian laws place direct threats and limitation on the right of free speech in that society. These range from and include the Sedition Act of 1948, the Internal Security Act of 1971, the Printing Presses Publication Act of 1984, and the 1986 amendments to the Official Secrets Act.

Under the Sedition Act, sedition can be committed in any number of ways, among which are inciting "disaffection" against any Malay ruler or government; raising "discontent" among the people; or questioning "sensitive issues." Section 3 of this law also penalizes any act, speech, words, or publication that have a "seditious tendency." Kamali has noted that the phrasing of this section "to a large extent renders the question of intention irrelevant" (1994). The Internal Security Act provides for the indefinite detention without trial of anyone deemed to have behaved in a manner "prejudicial to national security." One's utterances affecting religion are possibly in an even more tenuous situation. On this subject, The Penal Code of Malaysia says, "Whoever by words, either spoken or written, causes or attempts to cause disharmony . . . or feeling of enmity, hatred or ill-will . . . on grounds of religion . . . shall be punished with imprisonment . . . or with fine or with both" (Kamali, 1994, p.263).

After a review of modern law in Malaysia, Kamali remarked that the "Malaysian Parliament may, by law, impose on the freedom of speech whatever restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of security of the Federation, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality . . . or to provide against . . . incitement to any offence." He concluded that "restriction on freedom of speech is quite elaborate" (Kamali, 1994, pp. 261-262).

Not only are spoken or written words theoretically risky to the user in Malaysia, but they are risky in reality as well. Since 1981, the Prime Minister of Malaysia has been Mahathir Mohamad, the unifier of Malaysians behind his now-famous "Vision 2020," and generally recognized as the architect of Malaysia's economic and technical progress. Throughout the years, for all the good Mahathir has done for his country, his own words

and actions have demonstrated a distrust if not a serious disregard for freedom of speech. The tone of that distrust is sounded in his book, The Challenge, which he starts with the belief that "words are meant for communication, but too often they are used for miscommunication leading to confusion and chaos. I have long felt this about words like freedom, equality, democracy . . . and many more" (Mahathir, 1986, p. i). While wanting to elevate the people of Malaysia, the Prime Minister remained consistent with the view he had expressed nearly twenty years earlier: "Why not call a spade a spade? Why not say bravely that the people of Malaysia are too immature for a workable democracy? Why not say that we need some form of authoritarian rule" (Reece, 1969, p.688). In The Challenge, he wants to "set the record straight" and "discuss realities," and much of what he says rings with pragmatism. It can be interpreted as being laden with threats of intimidation. For instance, at the end of one of the chapters, he warns: "Anyone who tries to use this chapter for his own party's political interests is not only dishonest but is practicing a form of corruption, the abuse of power that comes from knowledge. Corruption that prevents the stamping out of corruption is the worst corruption of all" (Mahathir, 1986, p. 183).

While the exact meaning of the preceding words is somewhat unclear, one becomes leery of saying or doing what the Prime Minister would define as corrupt.

Within the past decade, the Internal Security Act has been effected under Mahathir's direction. For instance, on the night of October 27, 1987, operatives of the police Special Branch spread out across the nation and "began arresting social activists, environmentalists, Chinese educationists, opposition politicians and sundry radicals. In all, 115 people would be detained without the possibility of trial. The small fry among them would be released within several weeks while the more prominent would be kept behind barbed wire for eighteen months" (Rashid, 1993, p. 231).

The Star newspaper in Malaysia ran a front page display of the first twelve detainees. Consequently, its publishing permit was immediately suspended by the Home

Ministry, and the permits of the Watan and the Sin Jew Jit Poh were suspended soon thereafter.

In his recent intellectual biography, Paradoxes Of Mahathirism, Khoo quoted Mahathir as saying in a November, 1987, interview: "Unfortunately, after six years, I found out people are misusing their rights and again trying to aggravate the bad relationship between different races. Because of that I think I need to be less liberal. I am disappointed because I had to change my mind" (1995, p.286). After an in-depth analysis, Khoo wondered if it really was a "disappointment," asking if it might not have been "a long standing prophecy [becoming] self-fulfilled when this 'democratically elected politician' turned authoritarian" (p.286).

Even the current Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has served eighteen months in detention for his activities as a university student leader of the Muslim Youth Movement. Anwar had been a "firebrand" in his university days, a "flaming orator," who had been sentenced under the Internal Security Act (Rashid, p. 208).

In short, MUCIA student speakers appeared to have reason for not speaking out on "sensitive" issues. And even if they had wanted to be kept abreast of the current issues, the local media did not assist by providing stories for supporting material and further thought. The legal threats and restrictions have essentially proscribed the mainstream Malaysia media to a "traditional role of sustaining government initiatives . . . dutifully criticizing the more egregious opportunisms" (Rashid, 1993, p. 260). Within such parameters, the people of Malaysia appear somewhat inhibited from the opportunity to become "mature" enough for a workable democracy.

Because of the proscription, students do not find analysis or even discussion of the more controversial subjects in the media. For instance, newspapers become a standard for desensitization. Rashid gave anecdotal evidence of this when he wrote: "Once, when asked to judge a school debate, I noticed that the written rules prohibited any mention of 'sensitive issues.' The definition of what was 'sensitive' was a negative one: anything

written in the newspaper, said the rules, was ipso facto not sensitive" (Rashid, 1993, p. 201).

Perhaps more attention should have been paid to a 1989 Conference on Free Expression in Kuala Lumpur. In it, a legal expert, Lee Min Choon spoke on judicial construction and elaboration by judges promoting "possible" unreasonable restrictions on "freedom of expression" and suggested that "this restriction tends to stifle the legitimate activities and aims of political opposition" (Choon, 1989, p.5). And Raja Azlan Shah, a judge at the time, stated what Americans would regard as a truism, i.e. that "free and frank political discussion and criticism cannot be developed in an atmosphere of surveillance and constraint" (Kamali, 1994, p. 262).

When the authors arrived in Malaysia, Abuya Ashaari Muhammad, the leader of the Al-Arqam Movement, an Islamic group, was arrested and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. Specific charges or reasons for the arrest were not released. The movement was banned, and no longer able to operate schools or run businesses under its name (Richardson, 1994). That step seemed consistent with Mahathir's concern that problems arise when "different leaders and interpreters of Islamic teaching have different interpretations Muslims of one nation are so divided among themselves and seek to destroy one another" (Mahathir, 1986, p. 105). The fear of the potential violent tendencies of some Muslim sects also exists among some nations in the West, but the means of addressing the issue differ greatly.

In Spring, 1995, the Prime Minister called for a Federal Election. The lead story on local television each evening during the campaign invariably featured the Prime Minister, with excerpts from his speeches and talks praising the nation, his administration, and his policies. Coverage of opposing party candidates with the defense or constructive articulation of their views was conspicuously absent. In fact, political opponents' broadcasts were on specified radio stations under carefully-monitored guidelines.

Of the 1995 election, a research project leader on Media and Politics at the ITM campus in Shah Alam, Sankaran Ramanathan, noted that "government control gives them [Mahathir's party] undue advantage" (Ramanathan, 1995).

Ramanathan's research group also had polled constituencies from each peninsular state in Malaysia before the preceding election in 1990. They reported that there "wasn't a single constituency where respondents regarded political reporting by the mass media on the impending elections as fair and unbiased" (Ramanathan and Aziz, 1995,p.3).

The respondents' views are more understandable in light of media broadcast content during that period. Abdul Karim of ITM Shah Alam's School of Mass Communication, made a content analysis of recorded radio and television broadcasts in the 1990 election, from the nominations until election day. His research showed that "96% of material from broadcasts directly support and praise the ruling party's leaders and candidates"(1995,p.4).

Moreover, public rallies were disallowed during general elections. The secretary-general of the prime minister's political party, the Barisan Nasional, explained that "overzealous speakers and sensitive topics can incite racial and religious unrest" (Awalludin, 1995, p.2).

Soon after the 1995 election, further steps were taken against an opposing party with Islamic ties, the PAS [Partei Islam SeMalaysia]. On May 7, the headline in the Sun read: "PAS UNDER GOVERNMENT WATCH," and the subhead read "DR. M[ahathir]: GOVT MAY TAKE MEASURES SIMILAR TO THAT TAKEN AGAINST ARQAM (Valentino, Kam, and Singh, 1995). In the article, the Prime Minister expressed concern that "fanaticism" in PAS had reached a "dangerous stage." He warned that "the manner in which PAS is exploiting the religion would deteriorate the akidah [faith] of Muslims and lead astray its members and followers [and that] if it is not checked in time, the impact could be more far-reaching than that of Al-Arqam." As a means of rectifying the situation, Mahathir said that his group, the UMNO [United Malays' National Organization] was "responsible to bring them [PAS followers] back to the right path" (Valentino et al.,

1995, p.1) Subsequently, the Prime Minister, who also was the Home Minister, accused PAS of constituting a "threat to national security, and indicated that consequently the Government could ban them just as it had the Al-Aqam less than a year earlier (Wong, 1995).

Placed alongside the other arrests and "monitorings" made in recent Malaysian history, this strongly suggests that freedom of speech as well as exposure to issues in mass media are matters for consideration in a speech communication course that ordinarily addresses propositions of fact, value, and policy. In such an environment, expressed views contrary to the incumbent party line might, at best, die of loneliness. Legal pressures had to have not only a direct effect on the attitudes of students toward speaking out on controversial issues, but also on their ability to learn, find, explore, and understand, as well as expound upon those issues.

SPEECHMAKING IN THE CLASSROOM

Topics and purposes. In American classes there can be a propensity for many students just to describe phenomena and report information that has been compiled by others; likewise, Malaysian students tended to explore noncontroversial materials, and put them into oral discourses. But, their descriptions seemed to go beyond vicarious reading, which is often the focus of their American counterparts. These Malaysian students were interested in traditions, ceremonies, rituals, entertainment, myths, and the like told to them or otherwise experientially learned in their rural environments as youth. There was minimal questioning of the reason behind what they were told. This corroborated faculty surveys noting that many students desired to learn by rote, to "emphasize conformity" and "not question authority" (Summers et al, 1993). In fact, many of these rural students seemed more desirous of continued life back in the Kampung, i.e. their happy, secure, insular home villages, than pursuing the urban-type careers urged upon them by parents and/or the government. They had been awarded scholarships and "assigned" majors by the

Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (JPA), i.e., their Public Services Department (Summers et al, 1993).

Our students had great emotional attachment to their pasts, relatives, friends, and leaders. They shared strong involvement in the Islamic faith and a singular view of government. In light of common interests and backgrounds, these students developed more affinity for speeches of the informative and commemorative genres. In subject areas on which the audience was friendly and already supportive, they were especially strong in enhancing or stimulating feeling. There was an aversion to conflict or confrontation. Persons both in and out of the classroom had difficulty handling negative words. In requesting service from them, if you said you needed something done that afternoon, the persons we encountered would generally say "can, can," even if they thought it totally improbable. Rarely was an assignment not presented on time--generally students would attempt to complete it when required, even if they had other commitments or demands.

Organization. Probably the least problem our Malaysian students had was with organization. They were able to structure the body of a discourse with clear central ideas, main points, and sub-points.

Introductions were generally clear, with appropriate attention getting material and evolution of definite statements of the central ideas. At the very outset, the students generally would utter in a soft, nearly inaudible tone, a ritualistic statement, followed by recognizing the instructor and classmates. Upon inquiry, we learned that in those statements the speakers were lightheartedly "confessing their terror" at speaking on the occasion, or "thanking God" for His beneficence in letting them and the audience meet on that morning, and similar sayings. I took their word for it. Then during the year, a news article was released on the subject, noting that "When you have to give a speech, there are a number of styles [of introductions and conclusions] you may choose" (Amin, 1995, p. 35). The article contained familiar sounding samples, such as: "Biarlah saya akui betapa

gerun rasanya hati kerana teraksa berucap di majlis yang demikian hebatnya" (Amin, 1995, p. 35).

The conclusions of student speeches were less complete and usually did not contain the ritualistic materials, although such also are plentiful. Instead, the students frequently used types of conclusions described in lecture and textbook. Naturally, some stopped abruptly and unexpectedly. In America, the typical abrupt, catchall conclusion is: "That's about all. Any questions?" In Malaysia, the same unfortunate situation is adorned with: "With that, I thank you." After that is a fast exit from the platform.

Reasoning and Supporting Material. Consistent with the aforementioned material on freedom of speech, many students in Malaysia do not study data and build arguments from them; they might not do so even if the data on controversial issues were more readily available. Instead, they often argue from authority. There is a strong acceptance of authoritative conclusions with little questioning of how they were derived. Such a reliance on argument from authority, especially when accompanied by the central belief that it is wrong to question or criticize the authority, manifests the ipse dixit or "he says so" fallacy. Even if "he" is often right, it can be dangerous to put our reasoning or critical thinking abilities "on hold" if we intend to be unmanipulated or uncontrolled by others. Discipline and "conformity" can have merit in society but not at the expense of analysis and critical thought. Thus, the following views of the Prime Minister can be inhibitive despite the good intentions with which they are stated:

If every member of society understands the importance of organization and discipline and plays his part out of a sense of responsibility, the society will be stable and progressive. But if many or all members of society refuse to conform to its organization and discipline and insist on acting outside the given limits, disruption is inevitable, with adverse effects on those concerned and indeed on the entire society. (Mahathir, 1986, p. 137).

The students in our classes were disciplined and generally intelligent. Several reasoned effectively, and could become effective leaders in the future. Still there were too many whose reasoning needed to improve beyond a level of merely confirming authoritative conclusions. Perhaps it was captured best by an Indian taxi driver who described some Malays in response to a casual question by a journalist: "These people are followers. With good leaders, they will be good people, With bad leaders, they will be bad people." (Rashid, 1993, p. 137).

With all the dangers of societal "chaos" resulting from it, more reasoning beyond citing authoritative conclusions is needed to assure that these students will be more than future "followers."

Classroom supporting materials on most controversial issues were derived from U.S. sources, and they referred to problems in the U.S. concerning environment, penal programs, nutrition, and various other issues. Frequently, speeches contained evidence from U.S. sources, specifying problems in the U.S., while their solutions were for Malaysia, i.e. what Malaysia should do to address such problems in Malaysia--however, the students did not produce, possibly could not produce, documentation of the problem in Malaysia.

For instance, there appears to be no evidence or documentation in Malaysia on the negative aspects of palm oil. Maybe there are no such aspects. The newspapers asserted that the American Soybean Association had been trying to "strike terror" in the minds of the American people about palm oil, wanting it not to be classified as a "vegetable oil." The paper did not cite the reasons or basis for the Association's action. Instead, they countered with findings of the Malaysian Palm Oil Promotion Council, saying how good palm oil is (Nutritional Aspects, p. 9). One would hope for more than a Malaysian biased authority's conclusion countering a U.S. biased authority's conclusion, but such is rare.

Delivery. Once the several students stopped trying to get away with reading encyclopedic quantities of microscopic words on a 3x5 card and started extemporizing according to the outlining requirements, the visual and physical elements of delivery became more effective and they established communicative contact with their audiences.

Vocal delivery remained problematic with many as they spoke so softly that they were inaudible. Further, the pronunciation was difficult for the instructor to comprehend, yet the audience appeared to comprehend readily. This prompts an issue: does the instructor of foreign students who are speaking to a foreign audience demand that the speakers adapt their pronunciation to him/her, or is the speaker performing effectively enough if the overall audience, less the instructor, does not find the vocal delivery distracting? If the latter, how can the instructor really know that the vocal delivery is not distracting or, for that matter, even what was said? Practicability demands that the instructor is a highly significant part of the audience for whose judgment the message is designed. This especially is the case when students are reluctant to criticize, even when they might not understand a word.

Yet vocal delivery does not appear to be the major problem in light of the trends of the new program. Because they are readily available, ESL instructors have been assigned to teach several sections in the non-American ADP program, and they have had little or no formal training in speech communication. The students of those instructors appear to concentrate on language, pronunciation, and the voice. In a campus-wide speaking event, it became evident that clarity and projection of vocal English had been the focus of those participants. Vocal form stood out, whereas content and other significant aspects of speechmaking appeared subordinated (e.g. analysis of the purpose, topic, audience, and occasion; research and use of supporting materials; and other such matters).

It is understandable that the subject of speech communication in a foreign tongue can be thought nearly synonymous with oral delivery or language. In Malaysia, even such a content-oriented activity as debate can be thought of as a vehicle for developing language

more than for the equally inherent reasoning and analysis involved. This was exemplified in a recent article in the Education Section of a local Malaysian newspaper. It began by saying "one cannot be a good debater without having a good command of language Students need to work on their grammar and vocabulary . . . but for a vast majority . . . two problems still remain a barrier: pronunciation and lack of confidence Pronunciation plays a big role in public speaking and debating competitions" (Sia, January 22, 1995, p. 35).

Indeed, elocutionary skills are vital to foreign students, so long as they are not allowed to overshadow or replace content.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the Malaysian students in MUCIA have received speech communication training equal to that in U.S. classrooms. The ADP Program, with an abundance of ESL instructors, especially will want to supplement language focus with reasoning, critical thinking, and application of supporting material. This must be done while seeking the maximum use of freedom of speech within the religious, governmental, and cultural parameters. The end product should be the same that is hoped for in the United States: ability to formulate a substantive message inextricably with those qualities of good delivery that include but go beyond linguistic skill.

REFERENCES

- Amin, A. (1995, January 22). Beginning and ending speeches in traditional style. Sunday Star, p.35.
- Awalludin, A. (1995, May 22). Tok Mat: Public rallies can cause unrest, Star, p.2.
- Chóon, L.M. (1989, December). Should there be any restriction. Paper presented at Conference on Freedom of Expression. Kuala Lumpur.
- Dick, R. C. & Robinson, B.M. (1992). Should there be exclusive sections of basic oral communication courses for ESL students? World Communication, 21, pp. 23-32.
- Hassan, M.K. (1994). The influence of Islam on education and family in Malaysia. In S.O. Alhabshi & S.O.S. Agil (Eds.), The role and influence of religion in society (pp. 119-154). Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM).
- Kamali, M. H. (1994). Freedom of expression in Islam. Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing.
- Karim, A.G. (1995, April). Content analysis of Malaysian radio and television during the election of 1990. Paper presented at Seminar on Media and Politics: Media Performance in Malaysia's 1990 General Election, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
- Khoo, B.T. (1995). Paradoxes of mahathirism: An intellectual biography of Mahathir Mohamad. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford Press.
- Mahathir, M. (1969). The Malay dilemma. Singapore: Asia Pacific Press.
- Mahathir, M. (1986). The Challenge. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications.
- McKibben, B.B. (1995, April 27). (Associate Director for Scheduling and Technical Services, ITM/MUCIA, Indiana University Cooperative Program, Shah Alam, Malaysia) Interview by Authors.
- Nutritional aspects and health benefits of palm oil (1995, March 5). Sunday Star, p. 9.
- Pong, S. (1993). Preferential policies and secondary school attainment in peninsular Malaysia. Sociology of Education, 66, pp. 245-261.
- Ramanathan, S. (1995, May 15). Lecturer and Research Project Leader on Media and Politics, School of Mass Communication, ITM, Shah Alam, Interview by Authors.

- Ramanathan, S. & Aziz, B.H. (1995, April). Survey on voters' attitudes and opinions regarding the role of mass media during the 1990 Malaysian election campaign. Paper presented at Seminar on Media and Politics: Media Performance in Malaysia's 1990 General Election. Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
- Rashid, R. (1993). A Malaysian journey. Kuala Lumpur: Academe Art & Printing Services.
- Reece, R. (1969, September 18). Crimes for democracy. Far Eastern Economic Review, pp. 688-697.
- Richardson, M. (1994, August 5). Malaysia and neighbors to move against Islamic sects. International Herald Tribune, pp. 1,8.
- Sia, A. (1995, January 22). Debating skills can be acquired. Sunday Star, p. 35.
- Shah, R.A. (1994). Cited in Mohammad H. Kamali. Freedom of expression in Islam. Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, (p. 262).
- Summers, W., Dobson, D., Ahmad, N.A., & Valois, A. (1993). The ITM/MUCIA cooperative program and vision 2020: a strategic planning document. Unpublished manuscript, ITM/MUCIA, Strategic Planning Committee, Shah Alam, Malaysia
- Valentino, Z., Kam, S., & Singh, P. (1995, May 7). PAS under watch. The Sun, pp. 1-2.
- Wong, C.W. (1995, May 14). Strongest ever warning against PAS. Sunday Star, p. 15.